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Working partnership in avant garde films

By Paul Liberatore

Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley were Muir Beach neighbors when they made their first film together in 1965.

"It was our first serious effort," recalls Nelson, a blonde native of Sweden who is internationally known for her work in avante garde cinema. "It seemed so romantic to us, to make films."

That first film, "Schmeerguntz," containing images and visions of the American household and way of life, won first prize at the Ann Arbor Film Festival and took prizes at Kent University and Chicago Art Institute film festivals.

Since then, the women have made three other films together in addition to the 13 they have produced individually — "Fog Pumas" in 1967, a prize winner at the Belgian International Film Festival; "Five Artists" in 1969 and their latest effort, "Before Need," which will have its premiere at 9 p.m. Friday at the Sequoia Theater in Mill Valley during the Mill Valley Film Festival. The premiere will be a festival tribute to Nelson and Wiley for their contributions to abstract filmmaking.

"Before Need," which runs 75 minutes and is shot in color and black and white, is described loosely as "sequences of images that express the emotional discoveries of an aging woman."

The filmmakers hasten to point out, however, that the film exists on many levels and was created organically. Visual ideas ("things with mirrors," "images with chickens") were captured on film first, then dialogue without a definite story line was written and finally scenes with actors were shot in a month-long burst.

The filmmakers derived some of their inspiration from dreams Wiley collected from children at Lagunitas School. "The parts of the dreams we responded to were the images we could relate to as adults," she says.

"We think a lot of the film is absurd," Nelson elaborates. "It is on the brink of being too serious and too stupid. It's complex. There are all these unexpected things. Things are multi-layered. That's our point of view. The beauty the woman sees in the different roles she's taken in her life and looking back on those states of being is both beautiful, pathetic and absurd."

Absurdity and surrealism have been primary in many of the films the women have made alone and together.

In "Take Off," a 1971 Nelson film, a stripper first removes her clothes, then takes off an arm, a leg, a breast and so forth until there is nothing left.

"Schmeerguntz" contains stark images, such as a pregnant woman cleaning a toilet bowl, that have the power to attract and repel. Nelson films like "My Name Is Oona" (1969) and "Trollstenen" (1976) reflect on the filmmaker's childhood in Sweden.

A painter until she began making films in the '60s, Nelson, still a resident of Muir Beach, explains her attraction to the medium of film.

"For me it was a combination of the visual — within that the use of color and black and white — with the timing, the dance, the motion, plus whatever else there is — the story, sound. It's so multi-media it's almost too overwhelming."

Wiley, a former English teacher who lives in Forest Knolls with her painter-sculptor husband, William Wiley, saw new creative frontiers in filmmaking.

"I find my interest in films peculiar because I'm not interested in machines, and there are an awful lot of machines involved in making films," she says. "But it was such a new medium. The possibilities that hadn't been explored were tremendous."

In 1972 and '73, Wiley made five films — "Cabbage," "Letters," "Zane Forbidden," "Weenie Worm," and "Miss Jesus Fries on Grill." "The Birth of Seth Andrew Kinmont" and "Coffee" followed in 1977.

Both women say that the creative process hasn't changed much between that first film 14 years ago and their latest work.

"We were just astonished," Nelson says. "It's the same thing then as now. We made a film we were interested in making, but we have no idea if other people will be interested in seeing it. This one was just as much a chance as that first one."

Nelson says her next film will be relatively short and in black and white.

"I decided that before I saw 'Manhattan,' " she laughs.

Neither woman is interested in entering the competitive field of commercial movie making.

"I teach film at the San Francisco Art Insitute," Nelson says. "That's as outgoing as I get. We lack that certain kind of ambition it would take to make commercial films. We have ambition, but not *that* kind."

Although both will continue to make films, they take a fatalistic view of any future collaborations.

"In terms of working together, I don't know if we ever will again," Nelson says. "It *it* happens, it happens."

Friday, August 10, 9pm

TRIBUTE TO GUNVOR NELSON AND DOROTHY WILEY "BEFORE NEED" *WORLD PREMIERE* 1979. 75 minutes.

"Because it had been so many yea since we had worked together on (film, we were wondering if it was possible to collaborate. We startec with some dream images, a few act friends, and relatives. Slowly the fil evolved into sequences of images th expressed the emotional discoveries an aging woman. The snow had melted and it was impossible to rep Standards of Perfection applied to the selves, the relationships, the lay of memory. Where are the tables fo one?"

Dorothy Wiley & Gunvor Nelson

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Silver Spangled Hamburg
White Faced Black Spanis
Saun Ellis & Marcus Misli
The Bog People & Queen Elizabeth
Oona Nelson & Ethan Wil
Niagra Falls & Thou Shalt
Experts & Jungle Sounds
Sea & Scab
Ray Rodrique & Vacuum Cleaner
Games - Puzzles - Surprise

Short: **"Moons Pool"** Gunvor Nel

In Person: Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Nelson